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ABSTRACT

Proxemic behavior in faculty offices was studied by observing the effects of teacher attitudes on desk placements. In addition, two variables of job demand--number of students taught and advising responsibilities--were also surveyed to ascertain their relationship to desk placement. During interviews with 89 randomly selected faculty, the subjects completed a survey of educational attitudes while the interviewers sketched diagrams of the teachers' offices. The data indicated that when a teacher high in traditionalist orientations had no advisees, the desk arrangement was usually closed. The teacher low on traditionalism with no advisees overwhelmingly chose an open desk arrangement. Apparently, individuals who see the world in different ways tend to use their territory in different ways as well. However, as the number of advisees increased to 16 or more, the high traditionalist teacher became indistinguishable from the low traditionalist teacher. In short, without some prior knowledge of both the number of advisees and the total number of students taught, any inferences made about the educational orientations of the faculty member based solely on office arrangement would be perilous. Thus, proxemic behavior, like all other human behavior, must be put into a total context to be meaningful. (RL)

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Professor Proxemics:

Personality and Job Demands as Factors of Faculty Office Arrangement

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Professor Proxemics:

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of Faculty Office Arrangement

It is by now well known that the immediate environment has a profound impact on human behavior. In one of the early studies of environmental effects, Maslow and Mintz (1956) demonstrated that judgments of "energy" and "well-being" of others were significantly higher for photographs seen in a richly appointed rather than in a dingy room. Clearly, other persons are seen in a more favorable light if the judgments of those others are made in pleasant rather than in unpleasant surroundings. Further, the administration of this particular task was more amiabily accomplished in the aesthetic surroundings. Unaware they were the focus of a further study, the research assistants lingered more in the "beautiful" room thus taking significantly longer to complete the task than in the "ugly" room. Moreover, in the beautiful room, the feelings expressed were of comfort, importance, pleasure and a desire to continue the study. In the ugly room, those reactions turned to fatigue, irritability, discontent and avoidence (Mintz, 1956). All in all, a well-appointed environment carries with it definite advantages coloring not only our impressions of others but extending to our own feelings of personal well-being.

It is not surprising that one of the lines of research to grow from these general findings should center on a person's office. Virtually one of the first things to be done by any new employee is to organize

the assigned office space in some manner. Almost without exception is the truism that no office is randomly organized: an occupied office has yet to be seen in which the desk was on its side in the corner or upside down in the center of the room. Clearly, some thinking intelligent being arranged the office in some sort of configuration. If we accept the hypothesis that each individual arranges the assigned space in some idiosyncratic way, then it follows that every visitor to the office is afforded the priviledge of observing how the occupant, consciously or unconsciously, chooses to organize his or her work place. It also logically follows that be seeing the office, we see something of the person.

Perhaps inevitable, this commonplace hypothesis of office space use was destined to be tested. Almost equally inevitably, the closest, most accessable offices were those of faculty colleagues. At least for this branch of nonverbal communication, there exists, up and down the hallways of academia, an almost limitless reservoir of research sites. Clearly, it was only a matter of time before researchers would capitalize on this sea of opportunities. They have. Zweigenhaft (1976) hypothesized a relationship between desk placement and student-teacher interaction. Specifically, if the desk were placed in an "open" position--usually with the desk against the wall so that no physical objects were between the interactants--he hypothesized enhanced student evaluations of the teacher. If the desk were placed in a "closed" position--with the teacher on one side and the student on the other side of the desk--there should be lower student evaluations. Using a 24 item student evaluation instrument, all 74 members of a small college were sampled with 19 of the 24 items supporting the hypothesis.

Interestingly, not all the evidence concerning faculty desk placement has been so straighforward. Campbell and Herren (1978) had students interview two faculty members in two different offices. One office used the open placement, the other used the closed. Student evaluations of both the office per se and the professor were unaffected by desk placement. Further, Campbell (1979) had students rate photographic slides of offices which varied in furniture arrangement. While the effect of desk position was significant, it was "generally of too small a magnitude to be of importance in office interior design" (Campbell, 1979, pg. 652).

At this point the results appear confused and contradictory. There is, however, a more parsimonious view which may explain all these findings. The Zweigenhaft study (1976) is quite clear in one finding: there is a relationship between faculty desk placement and student evaluations; it is quite obtuse in another area: what is the causal nature of the relationship? It is extremely unlikely that by pushing a desk against a wall, a teacher will enhance student evaluations. In fact, it is open to question whether the students in Zweigenhaft's study had ever seen the teacher's office. Far more likely is the prospect that both student evaluations and desk placement are the result of another more fundamental orientation on the teacher's part. Teacher orientations toward education itself, toward students, and even toward the university are likely to be in operation in this case. The students are simply reacting to the educational milieu created by the teacher. The teacher who projects a formal, closed atmosphere in the classroom is likely to carry that same atmosphere into the office in the form of a

closed desk placement. By the same logic, the informal open classroom teacher is likely to have an open desk arrangement. Desk placement, viewed in this light, is simply one more manifestation of a rather global attitude of the teacher.

Insert Figure 1 about here

As shown in the hypothesized model (Figure 1), the relationship between office arrangement and student evaluations is indirectly linked to teacher attitudes. The dotted line from student reactions to the office arrangement is meant to indicate that students may take office arrangement into account in their assessments of the teacher but only as corroboration of earlier evidence. After the student has formed an impression of the teacher, the office arrangement probably serves only to reinforce that impression in the vast majority of cases. The reason for this is clear on reflection. Teaching a classroom full of students is an exercise in self-disclosure. Much of this self-disclosure has been documented as nonverbal leakage, information which others perceive about us in spite of the fact that we wish to conceal the information (Ekman & Friesen, 1975). The leaked information is the very substance of student reactions. The teacher's sense of ethics, respect for students and fairness in awarding grades are not typically matters discussed in the course syllabus. Yet these matters are obvious to students in the course. It would not be unrealistic to say that teachers reveal as much information about themselves as they do

about the topic of their course. Quite naturally, these leaked revelations, spread over a course of study, are far more telling than a single detail--office arrangement--could be.

Operating from the perspective of the model, the Campbell and Herren (1978) and the later Campbell (1979) study now fit into a coherent pattern. Campbell and Herren had students interview two professors. While the study fails to specify the degree of familiarity, there is the implication that the students did not know either professor. As predicted in the model (Figure 1), the students had very little reaction to meeting a total stranger for the first time. In a later study Campbell (1979) did not ask students in interact with anyone nor did they actually see an office. Here, the students saw only slides of an office. In neither study was there much of a reaction by students to the desk arrangement per se. In fact, the findings of both studies are consistent with the hypothesis that student reactions and desk placement in the faculty office are both caused by an antecedent variable: the educational attitudes of the teacher. Directly, then, hypothesis 1 is that the more traditional the educational attitudes of the teacher, the more closed the desk arrangement. It also follows that the more liberal the educational attitudes of the teacher, the more open the desk arrangement.[1]

In addition, the model (Figure 1) also suggests some job demand characteristics which would modify office arrangement. Specifically, as the number of students in a teacher's classes increases, we might suspect a withdrawal to occur. Very few teachers object to spending time with students on an individual basis. However, when the number of students

becomes overwhelming, the situation is radically different. An extremely large number of students would totally consume the teacher leaving no time for class preparation, writing, or social interactions with other faculty colleagues. The subsequent hypothesis is thus: the larger the number of students taught, the more closed the desk arrangement.

Finally, we might speculate that advising responsibilities would alter the desk arrangement of the teacher in a rather different way. Usually the number of advisees is small but as the number grows the routine advising activities must be repeated again and again. Almost of necessity, for example, seating must be side-by-side to review records or examine correspondence, both typical advising activities. As a matter of convenience, the closed desk arrangement would not be suitable for effectively advising large numbers of students. Hence, hypothesis four is: the larger the number of advisees, the more open the desk arrangement.

In sum, this study seeks to examine proxemic behavior as displayed in the faculty office by examining the effects of teacher attitude on desk placement. In addition, two variables of job demand--number of students taught and advising responsibilities--will also be surveyed to ascertain their relationship to desk placement.

Method

The sample for this study was randomly selected from among the faculty at a large southeastern university. Using a current university telephone book and a list of random numbers, 89 teaching faculty were contacted for interviews. Five persons refused to be interviewed; repeated attempts to

contact four others were unsuccessful; these nine persons were replaced by another random draw. The university office of institutional research provided data on the distribution of faculty by academic rank. As shown in Figure 2, the sample appears to be a good approximation of the university faculty, at least on this variable.

Insert Figure 2 about here

Measures: The measure of educational attitudes chosen for use in this study is a subset of items from Kerlinger's Education Scale VII (Kerlinger, 1967). The original scale was developed using a sample of more than 1300 subjects (Kerlinger, 1967), the refinement and validation (Bledsoe, 1976) had almost 1500. Both studies identified two principle factors: progressivism and traditionalism. The scale used in this study, shown as Table 1, was abstracted from the latter investigation (Bledsoe, 1967).

Both the number of advisees and the number of students taught were assessed in an interview with the professor. These issues were masked by also asking for a variety of other issues e.g. academic rank, number of years as a full-time faculty member, how long they had been on the faculty and so forth.

Procedure: Student interviewers (N = 23) from a nonverbal communication course contacted each of the randomly selected teachers to arrange an interview. As anticipated, the professors almost uniformly suggested their office as the location and their office hours as the time for the

interview. Upon arriving, the student hesitated until the faculty member indicated an appropriate place to sit. Usually, there was no ambiguity in this decision. The purpose of the interview, as explained by the interviewer, was to "fulfill a requirement for a communication course." The interview itself took about ten minutes after which the interviewer asked the teacher to complete the education scale. While the teacher was filling out the scale, the interviewer sketched the layout of the office including the position of chairs occupied by the interactants.

Results and Discussion

The first concern in this investigation is with the adequacy of the educational scales. Prior scale validation has been done with individuals predominately associated with the academic education field (Kerlinger, 1967; Bledsoe, 1976). In the present case, our sample was a random draw of persons from a college faculty only a few of whom were in the field of education. Under the circumstances it would seem prudent to make sure that the scale has, at the very least, the same dimensionality as prior studies. Since it is well known that small samples are notoriously poor in approximating a factor structure (Guertin & Bailey, 1970, pp. 167-172), the best to be hoped for is a rather gross estimate of the true structure. Using principle factoring with iteration, $\underline{R}^2$ for diagonal replacement and varimax rotation, the emergent results are shown in Table 1.

Insert Table 1 about here

Even with such a small sample, the results are reasonably clearcut. The items designed to measure a more traditional educational viewpoint were items 1, 4, 5, 7 and 8. The first factor identified this orientation. The five items of traditionalism averaged a factor loading of +.454 on the first factor. These same items averaged a loading of -.063 on the second factor.

The second factor appears to identify a more liberal attitude toward education. The items designed to measure this orientation were items 2, 3, 6, 9 and 10. These items averaged a loading of +.378 on the second factor and only -.064 on the first. It would seem that the factor structures of traditionalism and liberalism identified with earlier samples is again being tapped in this study.

Having ascertained that the scale items do seem to be measuring educational orientations, it is appropriate to turn to the major hypotheses. The first hypothesis predicted that more traditional educational orientations would predispose one to utilize a more closed desk arrangement. [What was actually found were a rather substantial proportion of offices with an "intermediate" desk arrangement: the student chair sitting beside the desk. Hence, all analyses will use these three groups: open (N = 27), intermediate (N = 36) and closed (N = 24).] The data, as shown in Table 2, strongly support the first hypothesis ($F = 3.74$; $df = 2/84$; $p < .028$). More traditional orientations do appear to affect office arrangement in the predicted manner. The second hypothesis, more liberal educational orientations will lead to a more open desk arrangement, received no support ($F = .13$; $df = 2/84$; $p \approx .88$).

Admittedly, the results seem contradictory at first blush. However, it must be kept in mind that traditionalism and liberalism--as defined by the scale items--were orthogonal in both the earlier research (Kerlinger, 1967; Bledsoe, 1976) and again in this study. As an indication of the independence between the two orientations, one needs only to observe that the correlation between the two is a mere -.12. In short, the opposite of being a traditional educator is apparently not to be a liberal. It is quite possible for an individual to be a traditional and a liberal at the same time. Thus, the real reason we failed to find any differences on the liberal scale may well be that college faculty are, as a group, rather liberal people. If the predisposition toward liberality is a general orientation, and Table 2 would argue that it is, then there would simply be no variance to measure. Obviously, then, this hypothesis of liberality would be better tested using a variety of educational levels rather than only one.

Turning now to the situational variables, the third hypothesis predicted a retreat to a closed desk arrangement in the face of an increasing number of students. This idea apparently has some element of truth to it (F = 2.51; df = 2/84; $p < .088$) but not enough for full support. The fourth hypothesis, also situational, asserted that an increasing number of advisees would force a more open desk arrangement by necessity. This hypothesis is supported by the data (F = 3.23; df = 2/83; $p < .045$). These last two hypotheses, in particular the confirmation of the advising hypothesis, support the idea that office arrangement is occasionally dictated by circumstances beyond our control. This is certainly not to argue that human

beings are driven by the winds of chance, but it is reasonable to assert that some job demands create situations which seem to compel a certain amount of adaptation. Having advising responsibilities for a large number of students is clearly one of those situations.

Finally, it would be instructive not only to know that a variable is associated with desk arrangement but also to know the strength of the association. Regression analysis will not only answer this question but may also investigate any interactions between the independent variables by simply entering the sum of their cross products into the regression as a new variable (Kerlinger & Pedhazur, 1973, Chapt. 7). The variables entered into a stepwise regression were: (A) traditionalism, (B) the number of students advised and (C) the total number of students in the teachers classes. In addition, all three first order interaction terms were entered. The resultant equation is shown below:

$$\underline{R}\ (.37) = 1.23 + AB\ (.22) + A\ (.21) + C\ (-.17)$$

The regression indicates that the interaction between traditionalism and the number of students advised accounts for .074 percent of the variance in desk placement. Having accounted for this variance, traditionalism itself accounts for an additional .035 percent of the variance with the number of students in classes accounting for a final .028 percent. The remaining three variables each account for less than .025 percent and were dropped from further consideration. Hence, the three variables of the equation explain .137 percent of the total variance of desk placement.

Knowing that the traditionalism/advising interaction is a strong predictor does nothing to explain the nature of the relationship; we merely

know its strength. To further explore the intricacies of the finding, the upper and lower third of the distributions of number of advisees and traditionalism were plotted against the open and closed desk arrangements. The two plots shown in Figure 3 are revealing.

Insert Figure 3 about here

The data, as illustrated in Figure 3, indicate that when a teacher high in traditionalist orientations has no advisees, the desk arrangement is usually closed. The teacher low on traditionalism with no advisees overwhelmingly chooses an open desk arrangement. However, as the number of advisees increases--in this case to 16 or more--the high traditionalist becomes indistinguishable from the low traditionalist. In short, without some prior knowledge of both the number of advisees and the total number of students taught, any inferences made about the educational orientations of the faculty member based solely on office arrangement would be perilous. However, this caveat is not to be taken as a sign of defeat. Simply because the world is complex does not mean that proxemics cannot and does not tell us things about social reality. But the upshot is that proxemic behavior, like all other human behavior, must be put into a total context to be meaningful.

In sum, the importance of this little study is to illustrate that whatever impression or message we convey to the world by way of office arrangement is not a matter of whim. While there are powerful situational

constraints, individuals who see the world in different ways tend to use their territory in different ways as well.

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Footnotes

[1]The original typology is made explicit in the writings of Dewey (1902). He hypothesized the existence of a "traditional" and a "progressive" type of educator. The ensuing years have seen many changes in terminology if not orientation. Hence, in this paper we will frequently use the traditional orientation as being synonymous with conservative and the progressive orientation as being synonymous with liberal.

Table 1

Rotated Factor Loadings for
Education Scale

	Scale	Factors	
		I	II
T	Learning is essentially a process of increasing one's store of information about the various fields of knowledge.	.16	-.23
L	The goals of education should be dictated by student's interests and needs, as well as by the demands of society.	.07	.18
L	Right from the very first grade, teachers must teach the student at his own level and not at the level of the grade he is in.	.16	.42
T	What is needed in the modern classroom is a revival of the authority of the teacher.	.97	.08
T	Teachers should keep in mind that students have to be made to work.	.25	.12
L	We should fit the curriculum to the student and not the student to the curriculum.	-.30	.10
T	One of the big difficulties with modern schools is the discipline is often sacrificed to the interests of students.	.65	-.05
T	The true view of education is so arranging learning that the student gradually builds up a storehouse of knowledge that he can use in the future.	.25	-.24
L	The healthy interaction of students one with another is just as important in school as is the learning of subject matter.	-.09	.50
L	Learning is experimental; the student should be taught to test alternatives before accepting any of them.	-.16	.69

T = Traditional, L = Liberal

Table 2

Mean Number of Students for each Hypothesis Classified by Desk Position

	Desk Position		
	Closed	Intermediate	Open
Traditional	13.54	15.64	15.78
Liberal	11.38	11.14	11.52
Number of students in all classes	87.75	44.44	61.52
Number of students advised	12.00	13.64	28.19

Figure Caption

Figure 1. Model of factors influencing faculty office arrangement.

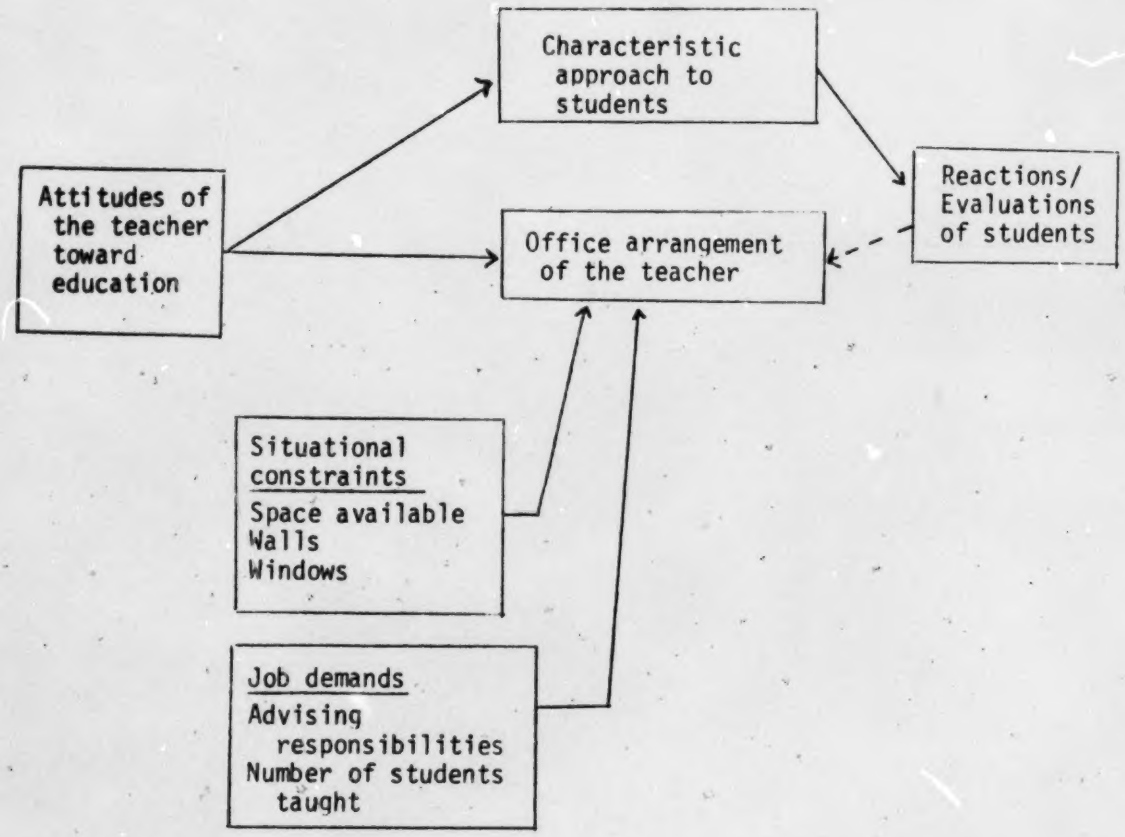

Characteristic approach to students
Attitudes of the teacher toward education
Reactions/ Evaluations of students
Office arrangement of the teacher
Situational constraints
Space available
Walls
Windows
Job demands
Advising responsibilities
Number of students taught

Figure Caption

Figure 2. Distribution of sample and universe by academic rank.

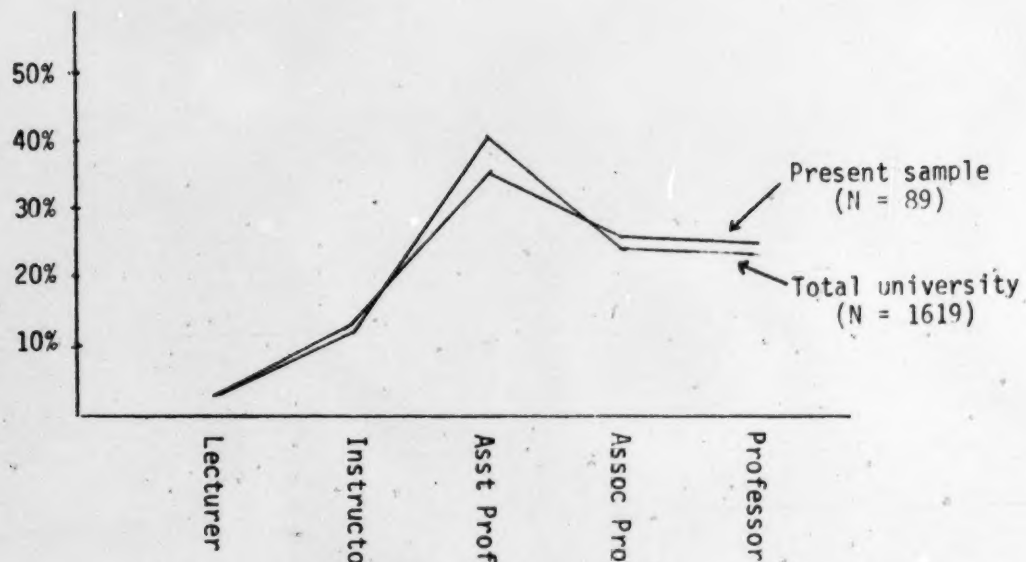
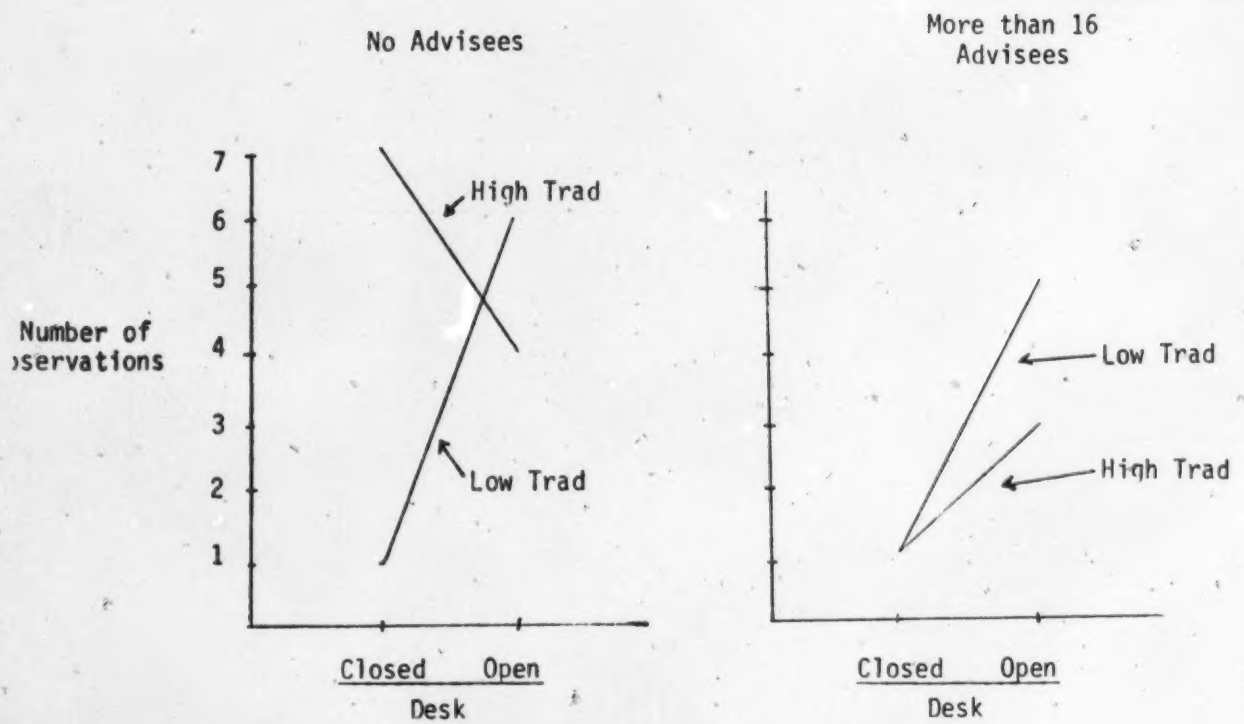

50%
40%
30%
20%
10%
Present sample
(N = 89)
Total university
(N = 1619)
Lecturer
Instructor
Asst Professor
Assoc Professor
Professor

Figure Caption

Figure 3. Interaction of traditionalism with number of advisees.


No Advisees
More than 16 Advisees
Number of observations
7
6
5
4
3
2
1
High Trad
Low Trad
Low Trad
High Trad
Closed
Open
Desk
Closed
Open
Desk